

Fortnightly Sermon

By
JAMES VILA BLAKE

Minister Third Unitarian Church
CHICAGO, ILL.

VOLUME 3

No. 14

IMMORTAL LIFE

CHICAGO
THIRD CHURCH PUBLISHING COMMITTEE, 917 WEST MONROE STREET
1891

Entered at the post-office at Chicago as second-class matter.

March
~~APRIL~~ 15, 1892.

THE FORTNIGHTLY SERMON,

THIRD YEAR,

Contains Mr. Blake's current discourses in the pulpit of the Third Unitarian Church of Chicago. It will be dated the 1st and 15th of each month, as heretofore.

This series will run to July 1,—twenty sermons in all.

Volume II. now is issued bound in cloth at \$1.00; but it will be furnished at 50 cents to subscribers to the FORTNIGHTLY. Vol. I. at same price and terms. For the present, single sermons of Volumes I. and II. can be supplied, as some back numbers remain.

Price of the FORTNIGHTLY SERMON, 50 cents a year, postpaid. Single sermons 5 cents.

Address, THIRD CHURCH PUBLISHING COMMITTEE,
917 W. Monroe Street, Chicago, Ill.

SUBSCRIPTIONS ARE SOLICITED.

MR. BLAKE'S BOOKS.

ESSAYS. Cloth, 216 pages,		\$1.00
POEMS. Cloth, 188 pages,		1.00
A GRATEFUL SPIRIT, and other sermons. Cloth, 303 pages,		1.00
HAPPINESS FROM THOUGHTS, and other sermons. 290 pages,		1.00
ST. SOLIFER, with Other Worthies and Unworthies. Cloth, 179 pages,		1.00
The five volumes just named are uniform in binding, dark blue vellum cloth, red burnished top, paper label.		
ST. SOLIFER, with Other Worthies and Unworthies. Paper (Unity Library No. 4, 179 pages,		.50
LEGENDS FROM STORYLAND. Cloth, square 16 mo., 97 pages,		.50
MANUAL TRAINING IN EDUCATION. Square 18mo., 94 pages, cloth,		.50
Paper,		.25

Sent postpaid on receipt of price by Charles H. Kerr & Co., Publishers,
175 Dearborn street, Chicago, Ill.

Press of Thos. P. Halpin & Co.,
178 Monroe St., Chicago,

IMMORTAL LIFE.

This life hath a future life, say we? Nay, rather, all life is immortal life; for what we mean by life is that we have left death, have come forth from not-being; why then return to not-being? *We*, or *I*, means personal continuance from experience to experience, whereby I, who had experience yesterday, having striven, loved, lost, won, sought, labored, joyed, grieved yesterday, link these things to the like or to other things to-day. Now this person, this *WE*, this *I*, this continuance from experience to experience, this link between yesterday and to-day, this reflection over from one experience to the next like it, this is what has come forth from not-being; and why should it return to not-being? Why should this *person* in us, this quality to span moments, times, events, and join one to another, this which we name life, or thought, or consciousness, or what you will,—the names are legion—why should this, having appeared, then disappear? Why, having come forth, being brought to pass in the divine suscitation, and having gotten a name, or named itself, *We*, *I*, *Me*, *Life*, *Soul*, *Spirit*, *Thought*, *Knowledge*, *Memory*, *Person*, why should this be brought then not to pass and not to be? *Why* should it? Who can give a reason? Who can give a guess that it is so, better than my guess that it is not so? Whose feeling that he will perish is worth any more than my defiance of perishing? Whose lack of will to live is worth any more than my scorn of the thought of dying? Who can give a reason for dying more than I for not dying? I can give no reason for continuing, say you?

But here I am! Try you to give a reason for my ceasing, or for my believing that I shall cease. Vain! While my ears are filled with the harmonies of life, will you persuade me there is but silence? Away! Dance, if you must, to no tune, no sound, a dumb show of an instrument, all keys but no pipes; leave me to my music and my march! I will not argue with you. I will not cut up logic with you. I will not probe the body with you, trepan, dissect, anatomize. I have no time. I am too happy. Joy is like a race—I must run it. No one who runs will ask what a race is. I remember now a fable of a fish who hearing some men on the shore speak of water, straightway swam everywhither in search of the water and spent his miserable days in besetting his neighbors with entreaties to know where he might find what he was swimming in.

"All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different, from what any one supposed and luckier."

* * *

"What is a man anyhow? What am I? What are you?"

* * *

"I know I am deathless;
I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept by a carpenter's compass;
I know I shall not pass like a child's cart cut with a burnt stick, at night."

* * *

"I swear I think now that everything without exception has an eternal soul!
The trees have, rooted in the ground! The weeds of the sea have! the animals have!

"I swear I think there is nothing but immortality!
That the exquisite scheme is for it, and the nebulous float is for it and the cohering is for it!

And all preparation is for it—and identity is for it—and life and materials are altogether for it!"

This being the ecstasy of life, now I will give in this discourse four points and two inferences, thoughts of life, not after the manner of the fish, but after what his manner might be if, having found that it was the water which was the vehicle of his search for water, he fell to praising and singing and joyfully celebrating the sea and the being a fish, the water and his own fins.

First then I will state this thought, namely, that this living place, the earth I mean, and this manner of life, and our going forth and being in it daily, all this which we collect and signify when we utter the words "this life,"—all this, I say, is but incidents of life. It is not life, but events of life. If, not saying "this life," but "this event of life," we spoke thus of

this dwelling-place, and of these conditions in which we are, I know not but this habit of speech, long continued, would have lifted us into wide light and joy out of many shallow cisterns of darkness and doubts. Life is vast; it has habitations and conditions and events without number. This earth is one habitation. We are with life and in life and life in us. That we are on this earth is one event of the life of us, which hath all events in it. That we have this wondrous body here, is another event of it. That by this body we busy ourselves with the earth and its materials, is another event of life. That we have childhood, youth, mid-life, age, and pass on from one of these stages to another, is a compound event of life, made of many events. That this body hath a further transaction beyond growing old, namely, that it dies and dissolves, is another event of life. "Man dies alive—think of that!" exclaims a poet. All these are but incidents, events; they happen in life and are of life; but they are not life, nor bound it, nor give account of it nor describe it.

Secondly, let this thought have place, namely, that if this earth as our lodging, and if our coming to it and our stay in it and all passing along the way, if this be but an event or a befalling in *life*, how momentous and great it is! For herein the stress of the mind is to be laid on life. The great matter is, not that this course of things, this earthly journey, is an event, but that it is an event in *LIFE*. In the first thought I laid emphasis on event—that this life on the earth, with its birth and death, is not the whole of life, but an *event* in life; but now I would turn about and lay the strain of all my force, for my own joy, (and for joy of others, if so much I may be blessed), on *life*—that all this earthly march and experience is an event in *LIFE*. Then how grand and important this present life looks, because it is an event, which means a coming forth, in *LIFE*, in the Everlasting, the Infinite, the Holy, which is Life! And being an event in *LIFE*, what has it to do with death? What says it about death? Being an event in *LIFE*, shall it bring up in death and become an event in death? Who says this? Who has reason for it? Who can show a hint of it anywhere? Nay, ye men of science, I have not "dissected the nerves of a black beetle," nor counted the lenses of an insect's eye, nor turned a hydra inside out, nor burned

up water, nor computed a comet, nor discovered a planet by the shaking of another, nor made cures by drugs, but I know all your science as well as you know it.

"Hurrah for positive science! long live exact demonstration!

Fetch stonecrop mixt with cedar and branches of lilac!

This is the lexicographer, this the chemist, this made a grammar of the old cartouches.

These mariners put the ship through dangerous seas,

This the geologist, this works with the scalpel, and this is a mathematician.

"Gentlemen, to you the first honors always!

Your facts are useful, and yet they are not my dwelling;

I but enter by them to an area of my dwelling."

All these things are but events in LIFE, which is my dwelling, and I am in it and its nature is in me. Shall life have no more event when this event passes? Shall it have no more event for me who have known this event? Nay, my knowing of this event and the *me* which is knowing of it, this is the event of all events in LIFE. Shall life drop this event? Who can say that life drops any event of it? Change is not a dropping of an event; it is but the fastening it to another. Wherefore, because this life of mine is an *event* in LIFE, I belong to LIFE. I feel deathless. And I feel how vast and glorious this present time and this present journey is, being an event in LIFE.

For the third thought, it is this, that if this present life be but an event or incident in life, and to be regarded grandly because it is an event in LIFE, and yet in a second and less important way because it is but an *event* in life, then surely how little ought we to be immersed in the events of the event, the mere incidents of the incident. Whether we be rich or poor, or high or low, fortunate, struggling, hungry sometimes or always full, observed or passed by, honored or unhonored, what of this? What are these things? I deny not that we must live and work among them. I say not that they are *nothings*. Rather would I say that even any incident of an incident in LIFE has its place or its import. Happiness, good cheer, good health, good wealth, righteous honors, these by no means are naught. We shall do well to desire them temperately and to take the means for them by the way; and besides, they train us to a very wholesome activity; and not alone for ourselves but for others, since our due and comely honors may give great pleasure and a lively record of joy to them who love us. With Paul I would say, "Covet

earnestly the best gifts." Yet with him I would add, "And yet I show unto you a still more excellent way"; which is to desire these things, these honors and riches and outward preferments, and to find a good taste in them and to like them well, yet to set them in a second place or in a small place; to reckon them something and to be sought, yet to reckon them little and to be sought not very much, but only so much as may exercise well the powers of us that engage with such things—to exercise us well, yet to leave full force and wide time for the better riches and spiritual deservings and fine understanding; and especially not to be disquieted, if, having sought these things well and manfully, we lack them, but to be able to lack them as well and manfully as we cast about for them. For it is certain that every one who will may have the first and best things; therefore how sure it is that every one may be able to lack in a manful and gentle manner the second and third things, or the things even of less rate than second or third, very like toys which having thought of as a child we have put away when we have become spiritual man.

To learn of what moment things really are, it is a secret to look back on them when they are long enough past. If one thing be a little way off, behind or before, and another very close upon us, the thing that is close will seem, very like, to be greater than truly it is, because it will engage all our eyes and perhaps cover all the other things with its looming. But when they become all a great distance away, the little distance between them, which made so huge a difference when they were near, has disappeared, and we see the things in due proportion and in their relative importance, as they are. Who has not experienced how little, when they are far past, seem the things which were great interests, agitations, cares, fears, worries, perplexities, heats, bitternesses, when we were walking among them. When we have traveled on and left them, we come to a hill-top afar, from which behind appear all these things in little feature, bits of a wide, cool landscape, covered with evening and dew and stars, while we bivouack for a night on the crest. This will help us to judge better of them and give them no more than their place while they have the importance of being with us and passing by.

This effect of time, the looming of things more than their value because they are near, has been mentioned well by Cardinal Newman, with the explanation well stated, to-wit, that it is just because the present things are mixed up with our souls that they seem so great; whence easily it is seen that we should use the advantage of the distant view to learn not to let our souls be confused too much with things just because they are present. In the book of Genesis (XLVII) it is told that when Joseph was advanced highly in Egypt, Jacob and all his other sons came from Canaan, which was famine-smitten, to seek a dwelling in Goshen, and on being brought to the king, Jacob was asked by the king how old he was, and the patriarch answered, "Few and evil have been the years of my life." Yet he was then, as he says, a hundred and thirty years old. Commenting thereon, Cardinal Newman says, "Had Jacob lived to Methuselah's age, he would have called it short. This is what we all feel, though at first sight it seems a contradiction, that even though the days as they go be slow, and be laden with many events, or with sorrows, or dreariness, lengthening them out and making them tedious, yet the year passes quick though the hours tarry, and time bygone is as a dream, though we thought it would never go while it was going. And the reason seems to be this: that when we contemplate human life in itself, in however small a portion of it, we see implied in it the presence of a soul, the energy of a spiritual existence, of an accountable being; consciousness tells us this concerning it every moment. But when we look back on it in memory, we view it but externally, as a mere lapse of time, as a mere earthly history. And the longest duration of this external world is as dust, and weighs nothing against one moment's life of the world within."

If, now, such be the effect of viewing things distantly, and many things appear too great to us when close by, from the very fact of the mingling of the human soul with them, how much it is to be wished, and how important it is, that we should learn to mingle our souls with them only duly, and to know them in their true values, as they are revealed when seen afar off in their place in a wide view of many things. For though these things of which I speak, the outward things of the world, to be rich or poor, high-placed or humbly-placed, at ease or much-striving,

though these be the smaller matters of life, yet it is a very great matter how we deal with them, and what concern our souls make with them. If being the smaller things, we make very much of them and advance them to be great things, then the smaller the thing is which we put in a great place the worse it is for us, and the more the soul is blinded and unable to see the immortal life. For if in our lives we put first things first, and the things which are of value we bring into the highest place in our thoughts, this is the same as to know life, what it is, and that it must go on, and what death is, that it is but an event in life, and a change by which life proceeds, and touches not that life whose nature is shown by the nature of the things which are first and greatest in it. To know what things are first in any thing is to know that thing well. He is a musician who knows well and feels most the things which are first and best in music, such as true tune and harmony, refined melody, thought, expressiveness, and the like, but not tricks of fingers and nimble caracoles over keys. So he that knows truly what things are first in life and attends to these things, which are temperance, truthfulness, lovingness, faithfulness, reverence, thought,—he knows life and hath experience of it, and will be the one soonest to get true report of the nature of life and of his own nature, and that the two agree and leave no death in view for him.

Also, if we look at things truly in their different values as we pass them on our way, and see rightly which are the greater and which the smaller, and treat them so, then the past will look the same to us as now the present does. The distant harmony and proportions will be like those we perceive now. We shall not have the shame by and by, and the ignorance now, of finding things dwindle in the distance and appear trifling in the past which we made all-important while they were with us, being disturbed by them and whirled about by them. But past and present will be a unity, and the same moral judgments rise in both, and the same things seem great in both, and therefore no insignificance anywhere. Life will be one stream, not interrupted. To perceive the past and present as one in moral import, and one stream of life, is the same as to look forward confidently, with no sense of interruption. If the past of us survive and seem great, not trifling, the future will appear to us in the

same manner, and we shall live in life and be filled with immortality. This Wordsworth meant by his lines—

“I would wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety”;

for then life is all one, and the future is bound to us as much as the past is. And the like says Coleridge, taking the lines of Wordsworth therewith into his page, that it is contempt of the past, arising if we have misplaced things in the present, which cuts away joy and faith in the future from men. “*They exist in fragments*,” says he: “Annihilated as to the past, they are dead to the future, or seek for the proofs of it everywhere, only not (where alone it can be found) in themselves.” But whoso puts first in his days and in his desire the things that truly are first, not vexed with small heats nor burned with envies, nor flying after low things as if they were high things, he will see the past shine like the present, and the things which seem great now, will seem great when he looks back on his past, and all will be of one voice and beauty; and unbroken life will cause the future to shine forward to us in like manner.

So far I have had three points:—1. That this earthly living place and our existence here is but an *event in life*: 2. That if this be so, we must consider how great and momentous *this* life is, because it is an incident in life, and life goes on unto everlastingness: 3. That the outward cares and interests of this life, as whether we be rich or poor, and so on, are but incidents of the incident, and in themselves are naught or little, but that it is a great matter in what way we take them and deal with them. Now, I come to another point, the fourth, namely, that this living-place, the earth, and our present life on it, have two special interests and glories. The first of these is a mental and moral glory of mystery. Some persons cannot conceive of living after the body dies. There is no way of imagining it, say they. It is too wonderful, inconceivable, mysterious. It can not be grasped. We have no manner of thinking of it. It is too astonishing. Now when I hear any say so, I can but wonder whether they find anything wonderful in this life; and if they do, then why find aught to stumble at in the idea of another life, or the continuity of life, because it is astonishing and the way of it

unimaginable? For myself, I seem like one shut in an ark, with a window toward the East and another toward the West. And having looked out of the Eastward window, till I am astonished with the things I see, the marvels of the heavens and the earth, and such an expanse, so that I am struck dumb with marveling, when at last I have become a little used to it, I turn me to look through the West window, saying, grown quiet, "Well I will look forth on the opposite side, and I expect as many great marvels as I have seen in the East, and even if there be more, and they be doubled or quintillioned, I shall not be surprised; after what I have seen, nothing can astonish me very much. So in this life I am filled so with wonder at my being, at all that belongs to me and goes on in me, at earth and sky, at other persons, at living creatures, from plants to men, insects, fishes, birds, monkeys, domestic creatures, wild creatures, at the unliving things (as they seem to us) from a sand-grain or a mist-vesicle to a planet and sun, at all organs, eyes, ears, hands, at the mysteries which make one a man and another a woman "and the feeling they have for each other", at little children and their manner of growing and the wonder of their changes till they become old, at crystals and songs and music and poetry, at sciences and reasoning and mathematics, with these and my life I am so wonder-filled that one of the greatest wonders to me is that any one can be so little expectant as I find some persons are. For myself, after all these wonders I reckon on the most immense and unimaginable things, to which we yet are as unopened as a babe is to these present marvels; but they belong to us, and await us, as these the babe. Such vast things as here there are, could not come from any source which had an end or limit of them. I expect mightily. I reckon without end. "What is a man, anyhow? What am I? What are you?" What is the soul? "We do not know what it is," say Cardinal Newman, in an eloquent exposition of the "Mysteriousness of our Present Being;" "it cannot be reached by any of the senses; we cannot see it or touch it. It has nothing in common with extension or form. To ask what shape the soul is would be as absurd as to ask what is the shape of a thought, or a wish, or a regret, or a hope. * * * * And what is it that unites soul and body? how do they touch? how do they keep together?

how is it that we do not wander to the stars, or to the depths of the sea, or to and fro as chance may carry us, while our body remains as it was on the earth? So far from its being wonderful that the body one day dies, how is it that it is made to live and move at all? how is it that it keeps from dying a single hour?" That I live at all is the one mystery and marvel on which I fall and stagger back, or lie on it trembling. After that, all is easy to think of, to dream of, to await; nothing is astonishing or difficult.

The second special interest and glory touching our life here, is the moral splendor and moment of it. The moral is the unapproachable sublimity. No matter what grandeur we be looking at, whether it be the utmost that mountains or the sea or the stars can show to us, let but a moral deed come to light there, a bit of supreme truthfulness or faithfulness or self-sacrifice, and instantly it holds all the majesty. All ranges, peaks, craters, waters, fires and suns pale in its presence. If one give a cup of water while his lips are cracking, or offer a kiss for a blow manfully, or leave not an "ass o'erladen" or "dog in the strada hard beset", let it be in presence of what conjunction of mighty things you will, suns and planets and moons, "height or depth, or any other creature", the deed has a face like God, from which "the earth and heavens flee away, and there is found no place for them." This moral capacity puts to shame all of earth's opportunities. There is not room here for the expansion to its full of a deed of self-sacrifice, or a soul of love and peace. What end is there to such a thing? What can limit a moral singleness? What shore hath that voyage? What room for it by land or sea? "Men there are", says the Cardinal before quoted, in a discourse of "The Greatness and Littleness of Human Life"—"Men there are, who in a single moment of their lives have shown a superhuman height and majesty of mind which it would take ages for them to employ on its proper objects, and, as it were, to exhaust; and who by such passing flashes, like rays of the sun and the darting of lightning, give token of their immortality. * * *

Yet they are suddenly taken away, and we have hardly recognized them when we lose them. * * *

There is something in moral truth and goodness, in firmness, in heavenly-mindedness, in meekness, in courage, in lovingkindness, to which this

world's circumstances are quite unequal, for which the longest life is insufficient, which makes the highest opportunities of this world disappointing, which must burst the prison of this world to have its appropriate range". By these thoughts and such experience the moral nature witnesses to immortality. There is a vastness and might in self-sacrifice, in devotion, which shows what death is, and looks through it and beyond. Self-sacrifice has room and possibility because dying is not destruction, and destruction is impossible. If one "give his body to be burned" for love, is the end of the body the end of the giving of it, and of him who gave it?,, These", cried Bartol, over some dead soldiers, "these are my witnesses of immortality. Think you the bullet came commissioned to let into nothingness the soul it could not daunt?" There is contradiction in the thought. Courage and calm self-devotion put death in its true place, and show what it is, that it is but an event in the process of life. And there is something in simple virtue and unselfishness so very grand and so infinite in what it may become and do, that this earth and its years have no equality or correspondence with it. It is the voice of God, saying, "Think not this small place is all; but for this my voice telling thee thou mightest think it all, for indeed it is great and holds things very great to thine eyes. But be informed. There is more, and this is but a little part."

So far now, to make here another review, I have said that this living-place and the days of our life in it make but one incident in life, not an ending, but one event: that because it is a befalling in LIFE, it is very momentous and holy; that the differences of our fortunes here are but incidents of the incident, and small matters in themselves, but yet it is a great matter how we take them; that our living here is such a mystery and glory that after it naught need astonish us and all things are possible; and that the moral moment of a man's life here is so great that we can conceive no scope for it but in everlastingness.

From these thoughts I draw two simple inferences:

The first is that simple Natural Religion has naught to fear in death. It needs no reconciliation with death. I hear much in these days of the reconciliation of religion with knowledge. We must reconcile religion with this philosophy, say some wise men; or, How shall religion agree with that science? say others;

or, We must make space for religion in this new discovery,—and how shall it be joined therewith? say others. Now they who say so are learned men and know all the things of which they speak, the philosophies and sciences and discoveries; but it is a question whether they know truly what religion is also. Mayhap they have not attended so well to that. To me it seems very like that religion is that which reconciles all things to each other and brings them to one; and that to speak of reconciling religion to a new thought is as if one should say that all things together must come to be reconciled to that new-comer, whereas it is that one thing which must make its way to unity with all things. Mayhap one who knows what religion is, if it have made a habitation in him, will not find the need of reconciling it with aught, for it never was out with anything, but is what shows all the many in One. But of this I will venture no more now (for it is a path with many windings and through some thickets which must be parted) than to say that simple religion has no need to be reconciled with death. Never it was estranged from death. It takes death as a pure habitude and a simple event in the process of living. Religion has no fear of death, nor any manner of fear, because religion is love, and with love is no room for fear. How can one fear anything who loves all things as they are and loves to have them so? And religion dwells in such a mystery of life, and so is glorified in the life, that presently it knows no end of the deeps of moral life, and insists, like the poet that “man dies alive,” and having done the feat of dying, he is not less alive, but the more, by measure of another event in life achieved.

The second thing which I conclude from all these thoughts is that “one soul is as precious as another”. This is not my own good thought. A woman said to me one day, with a very earnest look, “One soul is as precious as another”; and instantly I knew that it was so.

“In all people I see myself, none more, and not one a barley-corn less,
And the good or bad I say of myself I say of them”.

In the journey of this life and in the last event of it all are mates. Some falter in one place, some in another, some walk grandly in one portion, some in another; but none go without

staggering in some place and none fail to walk grandly in some portion. Through it all, and in front of the last event of it, "one soul is as precious as another". None is offered any more life than another. What is missed at one place and time is not lost. There are other places, and more time. If we be chained or set in a walled place here, and we see many things which we know it is good to do or to have, courage! This period is not all. There is time enough to do everything. There is everlasting time in which to take what belongs to us. No one can feel he is more beloved than another, nor less beloved; for enough time is the great gift which carries all others with it; and this is given to all, and to none more than to another. Wherefore all are the same in the love of the Giver of Time, the Father Eternal. Not one thing which another may not have would I wish, for it is impious to wish to be more precious and more blest than another; and nothing which another has is denied to me, nor aught of mine is denied to another, for we have time to come to them all. O what blessedness in such knowledge! What fine joy in such thoughts! What beauty of the face of life in them! I perceive the meaning of the Psalmist, "Behold the *beauty* of the Lord and inquire in his temple"—"Strength and *beauty* are in his sanctuary".

